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"Father" Africa on a Pedestal? Women's Men in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Leila Abouzeid's *'Ām al-fīl*

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Abstract
As women authors from various parts of Africa rose to claim their place in the African literatures of the second half of the twentieth century, the image of women conveyed by their male contemporaries had been biased and one-sided. As the writings of African women from that generation complemented this image with a female viewpoint, they also offered new perspectives on men through their male characters. How did the portrayal of men by African women authors fare with the portrayal of women by their male counterparts? To begin answering this question I compare two female-authored works set around the transition from the French colonial rule to national independence in two African countries on both sides of the Sahara: *Une si Longue Lettre*, by the Senegalese Mariama Bâ, written in French and published in 1980; and *'Ām al-fīl*, by the Moroccan Leila Abouzeid, written in Arabic and published in 1983. Both authors have not only contented themselves with rectifying the images of women conveyed by male-authored literature, they have challenged the stereotype of the almighty patriarchal male as well.

Résumé
Alors que les auteures de différentes régions d'Afrique revendiquent une place pour leur sexe dans les littératures africaines de la seconde moitié du XX^{e} siècle, l'image de la femme africaine véhiculée par leurs contemporains masculins est biaisée et partiale. De même que les écrits des femmes africaines de cette génération ont complété cette image à travers un point de vue féminin, ils ont également offert de nouvelles perspectives sur les hommes à travers les personnages masculins qu'ils mettaient en fiction. Comment la représentation des hommes par des auteures africaines se mesure-t-elle à la représentation des femmes par leurs homologues masculins? Pour offrir un début de réponse à cette question, nous comparons deux œuvres narrant la transition du colonialisme français vers l'indépendance nationale dans deux pays africains des deux côtés du Sahara : *Une si longue lettre*, de la sénégalaise Mariama Bâ, publié en français en 1980; et *'Am al-fīl*, de la marocaine Leila Abouzeid, publié en arabe en 1983. Les deux auteures ne se sont pas contentées de corriger les images des femmes véhiculées par la littérature africaine, jusque-là dominée par des voix masculines, elles ont également remis en question le stéréotype du mâle patriarcal tout-puissant.

Resumen
Mientraslas autoras de diferentes regiones de África reclamabanun lugar en la literatura africana de la segunda mitaddel siglo XX, las imágenes de la mujer africanatransmitidas porsuscontemporáneos masculinoseran parcialesy llenas de prejuicios. Así comolos escritos delas mujeres africanasde esta generacióncompletanestas imágenescon unpunto de vista femenino, también han ofrecidonuevas perspectivas sobrelos hombresa través de suspersonajes masculinos. ¿Cómola representación de hombresde autorasafricanasse midecon larepresentación de las mujerespor sus contrapartes masculinas? Paracomenzar a contestaresta pregunta, comparodos obrasque narranla transición delcolonialismo francésa la independencia nacionalen dos países africanosde los dos ladosdel Sahara: *Une si longue lettre*, de la senegalesa MariamaBa,publicada

en francés en1980, y*'Amal-Fil,*de la marroquí Leila Abouzeid, publicada en árabe en 1983. Las dos autores no se limitan acorregir la imagende la mujer en laliteratura africanahasta entoncesdominada porvoces masculinas, sino que también desafíanel estereotipo delpatriarca todopoderoso.

Admittedly, the African literatures emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, which institutions and disciplines have occasionally also been classifying and categorizing with other, sometimes restricting labels: Black; Postcolonial; (Third) World; of The Global South; etc., were chiefly poems, novels and plays published by men first. As women authors from various parts of Africa were preparing to rise and claim their place in the African writing of their time, they would be doing so in the name of their gender. By the nineteen eighties, as African literature theorized its own brands of feminisms against a backdrop of relatively new nations and languages rooted in colonialism, women's issues and concerns were intimately tied to questions of representation and rectification. Just as Chinua Achebe had been disturbed by the image of the African in Joseph Conrad's work, a new generation of women authors was now attentive to representations of the African woman by her male counterparts.

In 1987, a special edition of *African Literature Today* was dedicated to Women's writings, and was then groundbreaking enough to transform the hitherto male-dominated field of African literary studies. One sentiment permeating its articles is that, since African women's writings were only beginning to receive critical attention, and the canons of African literature were still largely limited to writings by men, the image of women conveyed by African writings was consequently biased and incomplete. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, for instance, declared the African woman's commitment to be the correction of the inaccurate images of women in Africa, while, according to Mineke Schipper, women writers had to "pick up their pens and express their own ideas about woman in African society, and thus correct or complement the one-sidedness of certain perspectives" (49). Among the prevailing images of women that the African female writer should rectify, she argues, are the stereotypes of the good rural woman and the bad city girl. Indeed, Florence Stratton pointed out that in African men's fiction, women are put in a "double bind." In other words, if the female character is an independent woman who engages in a modern activity in an urban setting, she is automatically labeled a prostitute, and depicted negatively. If, on the other hand, she is a traditional rural woman, a good mother and a good wife, she is depicted positively and idealized. With this binary opposition prevailing in their works, male authors had failed to represent realistic and plausible female characters.

What, then, of the portrayal of men that was painted by women authors who were rising to rectify these images of women in male-dominated African literatures? As the writings of African women from that generation complemented "the one-sidedness of certain perspectives," as Schipper puts it, did it do so when it came to both genders? To begin answering these questions, I will compare male and female characters in two female-authored works set around the transition from the French colonial rule to national independence in two African countries: *Une si Longue Lettre*, by the Senegalese Mariama Bâ, published in 1980; and *'Ām al-fīl*, by the Moroccan Leila Abouzeid and published in 1983. Both authors have not only contented themselves with rectifying the images of women conveyed by male-authored literature, they have challenged the stereotype of the almighty patriarchal male as well.

The purpose of comparing these two authors' treatment of male characters is to see where they position the identities of their male and female characters, in order to see whether they have been fair in their representation or have given a biased image of men, just as male authors had given a biased image of women in their works. However, I do not mean to burden these two novels and their authors with the impossible assignment of speaking for all women-authored works of their generation; although that case could possibly be made for Bâ's book. *Une si longue lettre* certainly was celebrated widely and considered exemplary of what and how an African woman should be writing. It offered a welcome addition to the literary landscape of the continent of the second half of the twentieth century by coming from (and focusing on) a female perspective. The novel resonated widely, proving to be an enduring success as a textbook in African literature classes worldwide. *Une si longue lettre* also yielded a significant and continuously increasing body of scholarship, as evidenced by a recent book on its author by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, as well as journal articles by Barbara Klaw, Wandia Njoya and Charles O'Keefe, to mention only a few, all focusing on the novel. Although not to the same extent, *'Ām al-fīl*, has indeed been the subject of some scholarly attention, most notably in articles by Michael Hall and Salah Mokhlis, and continues to be read in its English translation as *Year of the Elephant* in Middle Eastern and women's studies classes in North America.

Rather than ignore the vast complexities of individual African societies (let alone the continent as a whole) and reduce African women and their writings in the second half of the twentieth century to two novels, significant though they may be, my goal in bringing these two works together is to challenge the traditional division between North and sub-Saharan Africa in both African and Modern Arabic literary studies. Part of the purpose in addressing portrayals of men and women in a Moroccan and a Senegalese novel is to advocate a continental approach to North and sub-Saharan African literatures, and move beyond the conventional but inadequate tendency in scholarship to separate the two regions. Nevertheless, my choice of these two particular novels from these two areas is not fortuitous. Bâ and Abouzeid have different but complementary takes on the historical context in which both their works are set and in which the gender dynamics that they describe occurred.

In addition to being from authors of the same generation, and their success as textbooks as mentioned above, the two works also share other similarities. Both books are of equivalent, relatively short length (*Year of the Elephant* is sometimes called a novella). Both Senegal and Morocco are former colonies of France, in addition to sharing pre-colonial ties owed to a long history of contact stemming from geographic proximity. One of these ties is Islam, which plays an important role (albeit with significant differences) in both Moroccan and Senegalese societies. Additionally, the contents of the two works bear a striking resemblance. The protagonists of both novels are women who are abandoned by their husbands. In *Une si Longue Lettre*, Ramatoulaye is deserted by Modou who, after twenty-five years of marriage and twelve children, decides to take a second wife. Unlike a typical polygamous ménage, Ramatoulaye's marriage really is a case of abandonment as Modou ceases all contact with her. She has to support her children by herself, and is left in an ambiguous situation where she is legally married but leads a celibate life and carries a double parental load. It is after Modou takes a second wife and dies that the novel starts. Ramatoulaye takes advantage of her isolation during the mourning period to write a letter to her friend Aissatou, and it is in fact this letter that constitutes the entire novel. The reader reconstitutes the story through Ramatoulaye's recollections. Likewise, in *'Ām al-fīl*, it is when Zahra, the female protagonist, is disconnected from her husband that her story starts. When Zahra is repudiated by Mohammed, her pride is hurt because she is discarded like trash, and feels as if she were less than a person. As she says:

جلس وقال:"ستصلك ورقتك وما يخوله القانون. ورقتي؟ ما أهون المرأة إذ ترد كالسلعة، بورقة! ما أهونها!(12)

> He had simply sat down and said, "your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides." My papers? How worthless a woman is if she can be returned with a receipt like some store bought object! How utterly worthless! (1)[1]

Repudiated, Zahra goes back to her native village and reflects on her past. As with *Une si Longue Lettre*, it is through Zahra's recollections that the narrative is built.

Both Zahra and Ramatoulaye rejoice in their isolation and welcome solitude in a position where they would be expected to need support for their abandonment/exclusion. Ramatoulaye welcomes the traditional seclusion of the mourning wife: "Les murs qui délimitent mon horizon pendant quatre mois et dix jours. Les dix jours ne me gênent guère. J'ai en moi assez de souvenirs à ruminer" (19) 'The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon' (8).[2] Similarly, Zahra is thankful for the room she still owns in her village. When she goes back there, she says: " دخلت الحجرة وتصفحتها. خاوية على عروشها وحجمها مقبض. لكنني حمدت الله عليها" (24) 'I stand looking around my room, so desolate in its emptiness, so oppressively small. But at least it is mine, and I praise God for that' (11). Both characters appropriate a closed space before their anamnesic process begins. Besides being laden with feminist overtones and especially reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the two women's seclusion reflects the inward orientation of their narratives. This anamnesis whereby they assert their identity is essentially introspective, and, although highly nostalgic, it is by no means an endeavor that merely aims at re-appropriating a glorified past. Rather, it is the expression of a will to assert one's identity in the present. Both Zahra and Ramatoulaye restore, through their recollections, a vital part of their pasts in their present consciousness in order to create a viable identity in a context marked by the identity crises of post-independent African nations.[3] By doing so, even if they perpetuate the use of a woman as a symbol of the nation, Bâ and Abouzeid do so without reducing her to "Mother Africa on a pedestal," as Mineke Schipper deplored when it came to African men's writings. Rather, Ramatoulaye and Zahra possess the agency to use their past to build their present on their own terms.

Ramatoulaye's anamnesis begins with the period when she graduated from school and met Modou. Her graduation is a very important moment in that she was among the first Senegalese women to obtain a higher education degree. As she reflects: "premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine, nous étions peu nombreuses" (32) 'being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very few of us' (14). She associates that period with Modou's wooing, and posits the fact that she chose him over her other suitors as a reflection of the changes that were going on in the country at the time. Indeed, Modou was not her mother's favorite, but she decided to break with tradition by following her heart rather than parental

[1] All translations from Barbara Parmenter's translation of the novel as *Year of the Elephant*.

[2] All translations from Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation of the novel as *So Long a Letter*.

[3] In place of postcolonial or neo-colonial, I use the term post-independent to mean the measurable time starting from the moment a given country officially ceases to be the colony of a European power, and becomes a nation with such appointments as a flag and a national anthem. The term post-independent in itself, as I use it, is closer to the diachronic usage of "postcolonial" (or "post-colonial") from a historian's perspective, but is unrelated to the nature of the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, on any level, before or after the independence in question.

advice; this rupture with tradition, as well as her graduation which she describes as a pioneering act, took place around the time when Senegal gained its independence in 1960. It is significant that the past Ramatoulaye restores in her letter is not pre-independence, and that she attempts to redefine her present identity by recovering the attributes that defined her generation in the wake of independence.

The past that Zahra tries to restore in her present is slightly different from Ramatoulaye's. Interestingly, Zahra's journey into the past is accompanied by a physical one, in that she actually goes back to her native village, a place associated with her past. There, her memory takes her back to her childhood and the early days of her marriage. However, the moment in the past with which she begins (re)defining her present identity is the chronological segment that goes from the day her nationalist activities started to the specific instant of the Sultan's first public appearance after independence, when she started witnessing among her peers the first signs of corruption that would only increase thereafter. Unlike Ramatoulaye, who posits the euphoria of the newly independent state as the restored element that defines her present self, Zahra identifies the newly independent state as the starting point of her disillusionment, and goes a little further back to when the promise of independence was worth fighting for. Here, Leila Abouzeid is critical of the gender inequalities prevailing in Moroccan society, where men and women both fight for independence but only the men are rewarded.[4]

Thus, both characters recollect an important phase from their past, and the restoration of that phase in the narration marks the definition of their identities in the wake of their dissociations from their husbands. The fact that the characters' respective marital disenchantments are linked to the phases of their lives they recollect, locates the subsequent evolution of the husbands as the justification for their need to redefine their present selves. What is distinctive about Ramatoulaye and Zahra's situations is that they are set in the transition from colonial rule to the independent era. Both characters are surprised by the evolution of their husbands and the resulting outcome of their marriages, which they link to the historical context. By narrating their husbands' paths, not only do they criticize the evolution of their respective societies, but they also define their own growth by contrasting it with their husbands'.

Zahra explicitly accuses Mohammed of mimicking the colonizers. The historical timeline in *'Ām al-fīl* is marked by a shift in the social hegemony that posits a class hierarchy in place of the colonial one. After independence, because he has been an active resistant, Mohammed is rewarded with an important position in the government. He then develops a behavior typical of the colonized subject, identifying with the colonizer and appropriating aspects of the colonial culture. Indeed, Mohammed behaves like a *nouveau riche*, and adopts French manners and way of life. Zahra, on the other hand, clings to her identity and does not change. Her insistence on keeping her eating habits is a very symbolic act:

> أكل بالشوكة وأكلت بيدي. وتوقف صوت شوكته ورفعت رأسي فوجدت تلك النظرة التي تسقط في روعي أنه لو كان بيده مسدس لأطلق علي النار. هببت منتفضة وسقط الكرسي في جلبة وقلت: -لا يعجبك أن آكل بيدي؟ وبماذا كنا نأكل في بوشنتوف؟ هل هذا هو الإستقلال؟ ولا يعجبك أن أجلس مع الخدم؟ باسمهم حاربنا الإستعمار وأنتم الآن تفكرون مثله. (77)
>
> He ate with a fork and I with my fingers. The sound of his fork hitting the plate stopped and I looked up. Again he was glaring as if he wanted to kill me. I stood up, tipping over my chair which crashed to the floor. "you don't like me eating

[4] For more on women and the struggle for independence in Morocco, see Alison Baker's *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*.

> with my fingers? It doesn't please you that I sit with the servants? We fought colonialism in their name and now you think like the colonizers!" (54)

From this, it appears very clearly that Mohammed's evolution is marked by a crucial change in behavior that conflicts with his wife's statements of cultural identity.[5] When he repudiates Zahra, he says: "ليس عندي أي سبب" (12) 'I haven't got a reason' (1). Zahra, trying to guess what the reason might be, believes that he divorces her because she is a traditional woman who does not fit in his new "modern" way of life. She realizes: " أصبح الآن في حاجة إلى من تقدم السجائر لضيوفه وتمهد له الطريق بكل الوسائل" (77) 'these days my husband needs a wife who will offer cigarettes to his guests and help by any means necessary' (54). She clearly despises her husband for turning his back on his values, and glorifies the days of *résistance* and struggle for national independence, before the shift in her husband's attitude occurred. Those days mark the moment in the past that she reinstates through her narrative, in order to define her present repudiated self. It is the self that she was, and that she wants to be again as an expression of her disillusionment, and a form of continued resistance in the face of the evolution of the Moroccan social order post-independence.

Likewise, Bâ links her character's position to the historical context, although not as directly as Abouzeid. Ramatoulaye's experience is more personal, and more symbolic. She is more upset at the fact that her husband gives affection to another woman than anything else. It is in her disappointment in love that her disillusionment is expressed. The vanity of Mohammed and his *nouveau riche* stance is paralleled by Modou's vanity and his trophy wife. Ramatoulaye recalls the days of youth when her actions carried a political meaning inasmuch as they marked her as the new generation of educated Senegalese women to marry the man they love regardless of their family's opinion. Although not explicitly, Bâ does draw a parallel between her character's situation and the historical context nonetheless; however, Ramatoulaye forgives Modou precisely because of that historical context and says in his defense: "on ne vient pas facilement à bout des pesanteurs millenaires" (142) 'one does not easily overcome the burdens of a thousand years' (73). Although men from Ramatoulaye's generation are unfair to women and victimize them, they have the excuse of belonging to a transitional generation, implying that women's victimization is due chiefly to the historical context. Bâ's representation of men is nuanced. Ramatoulaye observes that "si malhereuse que fut l'issue de nos unions, nos maris avaient la grandeur" (142) 'no matter how unhappy the outcome of our unions, our husbands were great men' (73). With this complex portrayal, Bâ avoids placing her male characters in a "double-bind" analogous to the one described by Florence Stratton, whereby female characters had been placed in an African version of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. As Barbara Klaw has argued, Bâ does not place the blame on men, but rather on the societal structures in place, and sees the burden of challenging the status quo of patriarchy as the responsibility of both genders (147). However, as Ramatoulaye's interest in the past shifts towards a concern in the future, male characters of the next generation find themselves, to borrow Schipper's locution, placed, in a way, on a pedestal of their own.

When it comes to the new generation of men, Mariama Bâ portrays male characters that can be read as an example of what her own husband should have done. This portrayal is geared towards the future inasmuch as these male characters can be read as exemplary figures to be followed by other men. The first exemplary male character is Abou, the husband of

[5] For more on eating habits and their symbolic meanings in Morocco, see Josiah Carberry's *Arab Domestic Psychoceramics West of Egypt*.

Ramatoulaye's daughter Daba, and the second one is Ibrahima Sall, the boyfriend of her daughter Aissatou whom he impregnates. To a certain extent, Abou is the antithesis of Modou's brother, Tamsir. While Ramatoulaye accuses Tamsir of exploiting his wives who obey him "at the crook of a finger," she says of Abou and his wife:

> Daba, les travaux ménagers ne l'accablent pas. Son mari cuit le riz aussi bien qu'elle, son mari qui proclame, quand je lui dis qu'il « pourrit » sa femme : « Daba est ma femme, elle n'est pas mon esclave, ni ma servante. » (143)
>
> Daba does not find household work a burden. Her husband cooks rice as well as she does; her husband who claims when I tell him he spoils his wife: "Daba is my wife. She is not my slave nor my servant." (73)

Unlike Tamsir, Abou does not treat his wife as a servant but shares with her the burden of domestic chores. As a result, Daba finds the time to get involved in militant and humanitarian activities. Here, the author gives a model for collaboration between men and women allowing for political engagement.

Besides the concrete aspect of distributing household work between husband and wife, the difference between Abou and Tamsir exists at the level of man's conception of the woman. Unlike Tamsir, who conceives of wives as objects to be collected, Abou loves his wife and identifies with her. As Ramatoulaye reflects:

> Je sens mûrir la tendresse de ce jeune couple qui est l'image du couple tel que je la rêvais. Ils s'identifient l'un à l'autre, discutent de tout pour trouver un compromis. (143)
>
> I sense tenderness growing between this young couple, just as I have always imagined. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise. (73-74)

To Ramatoulaye, who sees marriage as an act of faith and of love, Abou appears the ideal man in his relationship with his wife. It is clear that the author is criticizing men like Tamsir—who do not marry wives but servants who are expected to toil for their husbands—by showing them how Abou respects his wife and does not treat her like a servant. Moreover, the fact that Abou and Daba have a healthy marriage can be seen as a way for the author to formulate the hope that, in the future, the oppressive drives of patriarchal society will diminish as dialogue between the two sexes increases.

If Abou comes as an answer to Tamsir's flaws, Ibrahima Sall comes as an answer to those of Modou. Whereas Modou abandons his children, Ibrahima takes his responsibilities as a father before his child is even born. Indeed, Ibrahima and young Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's daughter, are lovers, and when Aissatou unexpectedly becomes pregnant, Ibrahima demonstrates a high sense of responsibility. Instead of denying his accountability for his girlfriend's condition, he spontaneously proposes to marry her and is ready to assume his duties as a father. Although he is still only a student, he offers to contribute financially to the needs of the child. With this attitude, Ibrahima is antithetical to Modou, who, to keep up a high standard of living, abandons his first wife and children and stops giving them money, forcing Ramatoulaye to provide for the needs of her twelve children alone.

Besides being an exemplary father, Ibrahima also promises to be an excellent husband, in that he is not selfish, and thinks of his future wife's problems as his own. This appears in his insistence on finding a solution for her to continue her studies. When Ramatoulaye tells him

about her fear that her daughter might have to withdraw from school due to her condition, he answers that he has already thought about it, suggesting that his own mother would take care of the child so Aissatou may concentrate on her studies. Ibrahima's attitude contrasts with Modou's irresponsibility. In spite of his young age, Ibrahima is very much unlike Modou who takes a second wife, gets into debt in order to keep up a high living standard with her, and then leaves his family a pile of unpaid bills as an inheritance.

With Ramatoulaye's perspective on the characters of Abou and Ibrahima, whereby she optimistically idealizes the men of the new generation, Bâ adds to her nuanced portrayal of male characters of Modou's generation as victimizers who are themselves victims of a particular difficult historical context. Abouzeid's exemplary men, in contrast, are more ambiguous. Whereas *Une si Longue Lettre* forecasts a bright future, there is hardly any mention of a next generation in *'Ām al-fīl*. There, Leila Abouzeid follows a time-honored African literary tradition of sterile characters, which symbolically mirrors the state of society in the wake of colonialism. It seems that Zahra's generation cannot procreate because of its corruption. There can be no future if the present is not rectified first. Thus, the exemplary men she presents are in the protagonist's own generation, like Hajj Ali, or in the previous generation, like the Sheikh.

Hajj Ali is the only male resistant who goes back to his traditional life after independence, which makes him antithetical to Mohammed. After independence, Hajj Ali is appointed *caid*, like most of the veterans, but he soon resigns to go back to his old blacksmith's shop. Zahra sees him as: "فأجده كالسوقي الذي أفرغ عليه لباس السهرة فشعر بالإختناق ثم عاد إلى أسماله فتنفس الصعداء" (49) 'a common man uneasy in fine evening clothes, a man who can only breath freely if dressed in his worn familiar rags' (32). Significantly, he is the only one who has children, whereas almost all the other members of the resistance movement do not have any. This barrenness might be seen as symbolic of the unnaturalness of the life which people like Mohammed lead after independence: they cannot procreate because they have given up their principles. Hajj Ali, on the contrary, goes back to his old life. For Zahra, he is an example that the others should have followed. As Zahra reflects:

> الحاج علي ما زالت ورشته هي ورشته. رجل شارك في النضال الوطني عند الضرورة
> وعرف كيف يعود إلى مكانه. كبر أبناؤه وبنته وأصبح فيهم مهندس الدولة والأستاذ الجامعي.
> أفكر فيه فأدرك بإعجاب متجدد كل مرة كأنني أكتشف الأمر لأول مرة أنه من ١لحدادة خدم
> وطنه وصنع أبناءه. (93-94)
>
> Hajj Ali is still in his workshop. A man who joined the struggle when it needed him, but who knew how to return to where he belonged. His sons and daughters grew up: one became an engineer and another a university professor. Whenever I think of him, I realize with renewed admiration, as if discovering it for the first time, that from his blacksmith shop he served his country and educated his children. (67)

As illustrated by the fact that he is the only character with children in the novel, Hajj Ali is an exemplary character insofar as his integrity is the *causa sine qua non* for a future to be envisaged.

Besides Hajj Ali's case, Abouzeid presents the sheikh as another exemplary character. The sheikh is a religious elderly man who lives in a shrine in Zahra's village, and whom she used to visit with her grandmother when she was a child. When she is repudiated she goes to see him because he represents stability for her. In fact, after independence, it is because everybody around her appropriates the colonizer's way of life at the detriment of their own identities, that Zahra

feels lost. The sheikh, however, does not change, and this is what makes him ideal in her eyes. As soon as she sees him she feels reassured, and says: "لم يتغير فيه شيء كأن الدهر لا يمر به." (18) 'nothing about him has changed. As if in his world time does not exist' (7). Like Hajj Ali, the sheikh is exemplary because he is not a victim of false values, but a man of principles who clings to his identity just as Zahra does.

With the sheikh, Abouzeid inverts the clichéd "Mother Africa, guardian of traditions" motif of male-authored African literature by choosing a father figure to place "on a pedestal" in idealizing the sheikh.[6] Indeed, this character can be considered as symbolizing the continuity of the identity and the values of the past, which people like Mohammed abandon after independence. Accordingly, in *'Ām al-fīl*, it is he who is "father" Africa, guardian of traditions. Zahra looks at him and wonders: " كم عمره؟ سبعون؟ ثمانون؟ أكثر؟ هذا ما كنا نقوله من أيام طفولتي، أيام جدتي."(18) 'How old is he? Seventy? Eighty? More? That's what we said during the days of my grandmother' (7). Although the sheikh is old, the fact that he has always been makes him ageless, which is reassuring to Zahra because it implies that he will always be there. In that sense, he stands for continuity rather than newness.

Moreover, Hajj Ali and the sheikh are also a means whereby the author expresses her political stance vis-à-vis Islam. Hajj Ali is, after all, a Hajj; and the shrine where Zahra takes shelter is a very religious space, as illustrated by the fact that as she enters it the sheikh is reciting verses from the Qur'an. As Michael Hall points out:

> Abouzeid challenges European discourse on Islam by choosing to portray the sheikh as a warm, helpful and genuinely spiritual person rather than as a stereotypically authoritarian and misogynist figure. The sheikh, like the text of Year of the Elephant itself, stands in sharp contrast to the lurid images of "mad ayatollahs" and "fanatical fundamentalists" all too common in the Western media and Western academic discourse alike.

Although Salah Moukhli remarks that by "turning to a religious figure, Zahra seems to have moved ironically from one hegemonic discourse to another" (77), Zahra does not see Islam as a cause for women's oppression, but rather as a refuge. In fact, by associating the two men she admires with religion, Zahra's perspective on men appears atavistic. By constructing her present on the basis of her own personal history, she condemns those men who, unlike Hajj Ali and the sheikh, have cut ties with their own pasts.

Furthermore, by deciding to write in Arabic rather than French, Abouzeid reaffirms her anticolonial attitude. Not only does this political decision mark the restoration of a past identity in the present self, it also orients the text towards an Arabic speaking audience. As Elizabeth Fernea notes in her introduction to *Year of the Elephant*:

> [Leila Abouzeid] learned both French and Arabic but decided to write in Arabic, not only because she believes it is the proper language of her religious faith and therefore of her country, but because the audience she wishes to reach lives in the wider Arabo-Islamic world, where Arabic, not French or English, is the lingua-franca of the majority of people. (xxi)

Thus, Zahra recovers the period of national resistance to define herself, and claims a glorified Islamic past for her male counterparts. Nonetheless, the structure of this identity quest

[6] The prime example of the "Mother Africa" stereotype for this generation of writers remains Senghor's "Femme noire" poem.

remains geared towards continuity of the past, unlike Ramatoulaye's which is transitional, between two generations. Nevertheless, the two authors' portrayal of male characters remains skewed to a certain extent. In *Une si Longue Lettre*, the narration is very subjective because of the epistolary form of the novel. While this is certainly what was called for in a literary context dominated by male authors, the voices of the male characters in the novel takes the form of speeches reported by the narrator, Ramatoulaye. Therefore, men in *Une si Longue Lettre* are always presented from the exterior point of view of a woman. Thus, Bâ's representation of men can be said to be incomplete because she does not give an introspective view of her male characters. Similarly, in *'Ām al-fīl*, men are continuously on the margins of the narrative. Indeed, the novel seems to be split into two spaces: one masculine, which we observe from a distance, and the other feminine, where most of the plot occurs and to which the reader is confined.

When taking into account the period in which these works have appeared, one dominated by male-authored works and men's perspectives, the necessity of woman-centric novels to foster dialogic interactions within African literature brings a certain balance between men and women's positions in African Literatures. African women authors' treatment of male characters in this context can be seen as an answer to the men authors who have marginalized female characters in their works. Indeed, these women authors are somehow pioneers in the context of the second half of the twentieth century, and had to impose their point of view in order to earn a place in this male-dominated realm. Now that they have done so, and African literature today is a space where a woman writer is no longer a novelty, the male characters in *Une si longue lettre* and *'Ām al-fīl* may seem as dated as the female characters in the male-authored novels of their time.

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